

50 YEARS OF HELPING HANDS

Upcoming 'Birthday Bash' follows record-setting year of volunteer recruitment



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Santa Cruz Volunteer Center Director Karen Delaney checks in with the three staffers who organize more than 10,000 volunteers, and eight to 10 big events each year—Ria Mukerji, Spencer Takata and Odessa Burkett. The Volunteer Center marks 50 years next week.

By Nicholas Ibarra

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LIVE OAK » Thousands of civic-minded Santa Cruz County residents want to lend a hand to support causes they care about, and the county's hundreds of nonprofits — often operating with small staffs and shoestring budgets — depend on that aid. The trick is connecting the right people to the right groups.

For 50 years the Santa Cruz Volunteer Center has done exactly that.

Founded in 1967 by a trio of social workers, the Volunteer Center has grown over the past five decades to include four offices, serving thousands of individuals and hundreds of nonprofits annually and coordinating an all-time high of more than 12,500 volunteers in 2016.

Now, staff say, it's time to celebrate.

The center will hold its 50th Anniversary Birthday Bash from 3:30–6:30 p.m. Saturday, July 29, at Cabrillo College's Sesnon House.

The celebration will feature a barbecue, auction, raffle prizes, live music and, yes,



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Racers make their way to Delaware Avenue after walking to Lighthouse Point in Santa Cruz during the 35th annual Human Race in 2015.

service projects — making hygiene kits for recently released inmates and decorating bags for the Adopt a Family holiday gift program.

"It'll be somewhere between a wedding and a family reunion," said Executive Director Karen Delaney, who herself has worked at the center for more than 33 years. "If a volunteer has made a difference in your life in the past 50 years we invite you to come

raise a glass with us."

In addition to coordinating volunteers, the center runs 16 service programs of its own, targeted to serve populations including seniors, prison inmates, immigrants and youth.

The center's well-known Human Race also broke records in 2016, raising an more than \$400,000 for 200 nonprofits.

"We're kind of a one-stop shop," Delaney said.

Many volunteers and staff other than Delaney have stayed with the center for decades.

Christina Thurston, the center's Director of Volunteer Engagement, started volunteering with the organization's youth program soon after she moved to Santa Cruz in 1998 at age 15. She continued her involvement as a youth mentor while studying at UC Santa Cruz, and the Volunteer Center hired her onto its staff right out of college.

Thurston left the position to travel and volunteer abroad in Tanzania, but when years later she returned to Santa Cruz, she found herself drawn back to volunteering with the center's programs and ultimately its staff.

"When you volunteer you really get to meet people who are different from you," Thurston said.

Connecting with people who are from different walks of life — whose only similarity may be their shared passion for helping with a community cause — is what drew her back to the center's programs and continues to fuel her passion for the work.

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Board member Melody Sharp, who has also been involved with the center for more than two decades, attributes the organization's success to the "multiplier effect" by which a small team of staff are able to mobilize thousands of volunteers.

Tickets to the 50th Anniversary Birthday Bash are \$40 per person or \$120 for a family of four, and may be purchased through July 21 on the

BIRTHDAY BASH

What: Volunteer Center's 50th Anniversary Birthday Bash.

Where: Sesnon House, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos.

When: 3:30 – 6:30 p.m. Saturday, July 29.

Tickets: \$40 or \$120 for four at scvolunteercenter.org or (831) 427-5070.

web at scvolunteercenter.org or by phone at (831) 427-5070.

Individuals interested in volunteering can find hundreds of opportunities through the Volunteer Center's website.